

What does Morgarten mean to modern Switzerland?

Address by the Ambassador of Switzerland to New Zealand, Dr. David Vogelsanger, at a celebration commemorating the Battle of Morgarten in 1315

Lower Hutt, 14 November 2015

Madam Minister
Honourable Members of Parliament
Your Worships the Mayors of Wellington and of our own city Lower Hutt
Colleagues Ambassadors and High Commissioners
Ladies and gentlemen
And most of all: my fellow citizens

Two hundred fifty years ago, the great English historian Edward Gibbon, author of “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire”, described in his “Introduction to the General History of the Republic of the Swiss” how four hundred fifty years earlier, on November 15th, 1315, “on the day before Saint Othmar” as the old chronicles say, on a cold autumn day a ragtag army of peasants and tradesmen, led by their able political and military leader Werner Stauffacher, had destroyed an army of knights in shining armour. This army was led by Duke Leopold of Austria, brother of a later King of Germany. The battle happened at Morgarten, a narrow passage at the southern end of small Lake Aegeri in central Switzerland, leading to Schwyz, the main town of the fledgling Swiss Confederation. It was make or break. The mighty Habsburgs would become the founders of an empire stretching one day over vast territories of Europe, America, Africa and Asia, an area in which the sun never set. This empire would last until the end of the Great War.

In 1315, unruly Swiss peasants had disturbed the Habsburgs’ plans for the past twenty-five years. The dukes had now decided to put an end to this once and for all. But at the end of the day, the Swiss Confederates, as they would call themselves from now on and to this day, had confirmed their self-governance. It would take centuries, more bloodshed and also diplomatic skills to expand their Confederation to its present size, not changed since 1815, to win formal independence from the German Empire and to finally obtain recognition of its neutrality by Europe and the world.

Edward Gibbon had himself been to Schwyz and to Morgarten. The tiny hamlet still looked the same when he was there as at the time of the battle. It does not look much different now. Morgarten is not far from our home, and this summer I went there several times, walking through woods and rocks and trying to imagine what had happened that fateful day. We do not know precise details. The earliest written testimony was penned by a monk in Latin twenty-five years after the battle. Some of his description seems to have been copied from the Old Testament. Still, we know that something very important has happened that day. This year, new archeological finds have confirmed it. And we know that the very existence of the Confederation was much less threatened after Morgarten than before. Just three weeks after the battle, at Brunnen, only a few miles away, the Confederates got together once again and confirmed their union in a new document.

We have heard, a few moments ago, the Charter of 1291 read by a young Swiss woman. It is the founding document of our nation. Our national day of August 1st derives from it even though the Charter itself only speaks of the beginning of August. This is not important, but the content is. What the Charter basically says is still valid

after all these years for any democratic community anywhere in the world. These men, mostly illiterate, a local priest had to write it down for them in Latin, these men boldly stated that they would establish the rule of law, decide their own matters themselves, keep the peace in their land, maintain law and order, punish criminals according to commonly agreed rules and accept no foreign judges.

We are here in an English-speaking nation, representative of that other great freedom movement that started exactly a hundred years earlier than Morgarten when barons in England forced their king to sign a document recognizing that his powers were not absolute. Both the Magna Charta of 1215 and our own Swiss founding documents have paved the way for the American and French revolutions and for freedom for the peoples of the world.

The first human beings have arrived in Aotearoa even before Morgarten. The Maori have conquered the wilderness of these islands just as our ancestors conquered that of the alpine valleys where nobody lived before they settled them. Today, New Zealand is rightly proud of the language and culture of its oldest settlers. Also we Swiss are not bound together by one common culture or language, but by a political idea, a simple one, the common will to be free. That is why we remember this year a battle that happened such a long time ago.

New Zealand, this small but great country on the other side of the world, so far from ours and with a history so different, at the same time a country in many ways so similar to ours, has remembered, with great dignity, this same year another battle. Gallipoli and the Great War are not just symbols in the distant past. Hardly a New Zealand family was not touched by these tragic events at the time, and the nation's memories are still strong. We Swiss who have now been blessed by peace for two hundred years, be it through divine protection, wise policy or sheer luck, we Swiss have every reason to be grateful to those who gave their lives in the world wars also for our freedom.

New Zealand and Switzerland are both small countries. We share common ideals. Not only democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Other nations are as committed to those as we are. But just as we are both stubborn when it comes to preserving our own way of life and our traditions, we want to be nations useful to the world. New Zealand demonstrates this once again, this and next year, by its active participation in the Security Council of the United Nations. We are also egalitarian nations, we want institutions close to the people, we give our politicians only as much power as they really need to do their job and we don't like the idea of big government.

1215, the Magna Charta, 1315, Morgarten, 1415, the conquest of Aargau, uniting the eastern and the western parts of our country, 1515, Marignano, the bloodiest battle and the biggest defeat in our history, with ten thousand Swiss losing their lives on a field in Northern Italy, but also a blessing because that day taught our nation to stay out of foreign wars, 1815 Waterloo, the end of Napoleon and of the invasion of our country, leading the same year to the confirmation of Swiss neutrality at the Congress of Vienna, finally 1915, Gallipoli. It is due to a pure coincidence that we remember all these important events in the same year.

Enough history for today. You have come to this garden which is Swiss since 1954 to enjoy yourselves. Swiss have appreciated the beauty of New Zealand since John Webber came here with Captain Cook, and many thousand have made her their own home. Today is another occasion to bring them together and to keep alive the traditions that they brought with them from the old country. We are delighted to show on this day a few of these traditions to our New Zealand friends.

In the old days our ancestors lit huge fires on the mountaintops when danger loomed at the border. We still do that on our national day in every town and village, as a symbol of freedom. And we shall do so tonight, as soon as darkness comes.

We Swiss in New Zealand, even someone like me who does not know much about rugby, have all fevered with the All Blacks at Twickenham two weeks ago and were happy when they achieved this incredible victory once again. But a few days later, we also watched as the Melbourne Cup was won for the first time by a young woman. You may not know that the grandparents of Michelle Payne were farmers who came to Taranaki in 1955 from Schwyz, the main town of the old Confederation, the very town that Duke Leopold wanted to conquer when he got a bloody nose at Morgarten, just a few miles away.

I ask my fellow Swiss who are not world champions in that regard to sing with me our national anthem in a few moments. I know the Kiwis are a lot better with their own which will be performed after the address by a distinguished representative of the Government of New Zealand. I hope I have convinced all of you that we Swiss are die-hard republicans. But a few weeks ago, the Queen of New Zealand has become the longest reigning monarch in human history, and we are all happy that she is in great shape. Queen Elizabeth II has become with the years a universally respected symbol of freedom and of the rule of law, also for us Swiss. We will therefore exceptionally perform both anthems of New Zealand today.

I would like to express my thanks to all of you for being here. You have come today from all over the North Island and some even from the South Island. When I suggested this unusual celebration of our nation in New Zealand, the response by the Swiss Clubs in Wellington, Taranaki, Auckland and Hamilton as well as by the entire Embassy team has been enthusiastic. You have all worked very hard for us to have a good time today. I am proud of the hard-working Swiss communities in this country and I am proud of a great team at the Embassy. Thank you all from my heart.

A special thank goes to the music groups from Taranaki and from Auckland, the flag thrower Greg Napp, and of course to the furry ambassadors of my country pulling the carts. I have been invited to attend, on Labour Day weekend, the championships of the New Zealand St. Bernard and Bernese Mountain Dog Clubs in Rotorua. Thank you very much, owners of these handsome Swiss dogs, for bringing them here today and for letting everybody see what wonderful animals they are. I would like to add that Laura and I own the first Great Swiss Mountain Dog, another of our big breeds, that ever came to New Zealand. If anybody stole your sausage today, it has probably been our Bari.

I wish to thank all the elected representatives of New Zealand's democracy with their wives, husbands and partners who honour us with their presence today. The Honourable Louise Upton, Minister for Land Information and for Women, the Honourable Trevor Mallard, our Member for Lower Hutt, Barbara Kuriger, the only MP with a Swiss name, chairwoman of the New Zealand-Switzerland Parliamentary Friendship Group and a good friend since I first spotted her name in the list of elected MPs in September of last year, just after my arrival in this country. Barbara's husband's grandfather came to Taranaki in 1908 from Einsiedeln, a village very close to Morgarten. Yesterday, the local newspaper in Einsiedeln carried a little article about her and about our celebration here. Here is a copy, Barbara! I welcome Chris Bishop, another Member from Hutt, and their Worships Celia Wade-Brown, Mayor of Wellington, and Ray Wallace, Mayor of our own city of Lower Hutt. Sir Neville Jordan, is a true-blooded Petone man and of course the Chancellor of this great Wellington

institution which is Victoria University. To all of you and to those I have forgotten to name – we are proud to have you with us tonight.

Madam Minister, after our national anthem the floor will be yours.

May God bless New Zealand and the Swiss Confederation!